

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 13 August 2023
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - Year A – Lectionary 19

1st Reading: *1 Kings 19:9-18*

Psalm: *85:8-13*

2nd Reading: *Romans 10:5-15*

Gospel: *Matthew 14:22-33*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our dog, Willoughby, is not the most obedient dog in the world. In fact, if there's something he thinks he can get away with, he will usually try it, even sometimes when we're watching him. If we let him off his leash at the wrong moment, he will go tearing away in a direction he knows he isn't supposed to go. But once in a while, if he knows he has disappointed us, he will slink off into his bed, hide his head and refuse to come out. I think most dogs have a keen desire not to disappoint their masters.

And I don't know about you, but when I was growing up I did not want to disappoint my parents, either, and just like Willoughby, if I knew I *had* disappointed them, I would slink away to my room and want to hide.

So here's a question for you: How would it feel to have *Jesus* be disappointed in you? And I'm not talking about him being disappointed in our sins. Of course we all feel ashamed of our sins. Adam and Eve felt that in the Garden of Eden and hid themselves from God. But what if we haven't really done anything wrong, but we just don't feel like we're good enough, or have enough faith. What if we think that we've let Jesus down?

Well, we have two different stories this morning where Jesus or God expresses disappointment in someone for whom there were very high hopes. In our reading from Kings this morning, Elijah, perhaps the most powerful prophet and miracle-worker in the Old Testament next to Moses, has become afraid that the wicked King Ahab (and his even wickeder wife, Jezebel) might find him and put him to death. So Elijah runs away to hide in a cave on Mount Sinai. And what does God say to Elijah, twice as it turns out?

“What are you doing here, Elijah?” “Oh, Willoughby, why did you run off again? I’m so disappointed in you.”

And then there’s Peter. Peter had just made one of his remarkably brilliant deductions, that if Jesus could command the wind and the waves and they could obey him to do something miraculous, then if Jesus were to command Peter, Peter would also be able to do something miraculous. And that’s exactly what happened. Jesus commanded Peter to walk on the water to him, and Peter did so - that is, until he looked around and saw the precariousness of his situation, and he began to sink. And then, once again, we hear the expression of disappointment from Jesus:

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Peter’s ability to understand and make these brilliant leaps of logic must have gotten Jesus’ hopes up, but then Peter must have felt that he had let him down. *Why* had he doubted? And on that little boat, there wouldn’t have been a cabin into which Peter could slink away and hide.

Do we feel like we’ve disappointed God? I’m pretty sure most of us feel that way from time to time, and maybe some of us feel that way quite a lot. Do we feel that God is asking us: “What are you doing here?” or that God is saying: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

And if we do feel like that, then what do these stories today tell us? Well, for one thing, they tell us that we’re in pretty good company. There are few people in the Bible who get as good a write-up as Elijah did. Here was someone who could seemingly command the clouds so that it would stop raining for three years, someone who could call down lightning from heaven to consume the offering on his altar, someone who could even raise the dead, and someone who eventually ascended into heaven in a whirlwind. And it was only Elijah, along with Moses, who appeared to talk with Jesus at the Transfiguration.

And yet Elijah had been afraid enough of King Ahab to run away and hide in a cave. “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

And Peter, too, who would be the rock on which the church was built, who also raised someone from the dead, yet here found himself sinking in the sea. So, as I said, if we feel that we’ve let God down, then we’re in pretty good company.

Now those who want to promote the power of positive thinking would suggest that Peter’s problem (and maybe Elijah’s) was that he didn’t have enough faith in himself. Jesus had just shown Peter that if he had enough faith (like Jesus did) then Peter would be able to walk on the water. But is that what Peter had realised?

No, I don't think so. Peter didn't say, "Lord, I think that I can do this. I'll walk to you on the water." Instead he said, "Lord, if it is you, *command* me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come."

It wasn't that Peter needed faith in himself, or that he needed *more* faith. He needed to put his faith in *Jesus*, to *trust* Jesus. He understood the power that Jesus possessed, he had worked it out and had even acted on it. So even if he did falter a bit at the end, he had actually proved that what he thought was true. It worked. Jesus *did* have the power to command him to walk on the water. When Peter faltered, it was after he had already seen and experienced the power of Jesus.

Elijah, too, had already followed God's command to make it stop raining. He had raised the son of the Widow of Zarepheth from the dead. He had proved that Yahweh was the true God, and not Baal, by calling down lightning on the altar. And then he had made it rain again. Yet it was after all of these powerful miracles that God had performed through him that he became afraid and ran away to hide in the cave.

So it wasn't at all the abilities of either Elijah or Peter on their own to accomplish great things, it was God's calling and God's command that enabled them to do what they did, even if they didn't do everything absolutely perfectly. And even if God (Jesus) was a *little* disappointed, he didn't reject them and say, "Well, you failed to have enough faith, so you're now lost." No, he gave them new tasks to do and gave them the power to do them.

I can be a little disappointed in Willoughby from time to time, but he's still our dog and we still like him. I'm not going to send him away to the Humane Society because he doesn't always live up to my expectations. And Jesus doesn't throw us away, either. Indeed, he loved Elijah and he loved Peter enough to die for them, and he died for us.

What we can learn from Peter's little experiment, then, is that Jesus does have the power to command us and to enable us to do wonderful things. What is important is that we put our faith in *him*, trust *him*, not that we evaluate the quality of our own faith.

After all, how does this story end? When Peter "cried out, "Lord, save me," Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him," and "when they got into the boat, the wind ceased, and those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.' "

Paul said something this morning about that. He said: "One believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved... No one who believes in him will be put to shame... For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

That is what both of these stories are about - the power of God to save us and direct us. God continued to be with Elijah. God continued to be with Peter. And God continues to be with us no matter what storms arise.

Amen!

Copyright © 2023 - Thomas J. Mosbø